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THE TRUTH ABOUT CORINTH

Dear Friends,

It was many years ago that I was first introduced to what many people refer to as a “Spirit-filled” church. By that I mean a church where the gifts of the Holy Spirit listed in First Corinthians chapter twelve would manifest. At first I wasn’t sure what to make of it all, but I could not deny that I felt the presence of God in a very powerful way.

Eventually, I chose to receive the infilling of the Holy Spirit or, as some put it, I was baptized with the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in tongues. I will never forget that service as the visiting evangelist laid his hands on me; I felt God’s power surge through me and a beautiful language I had never heard began to flow from my lips in praise, worship and prayer to the Lord. I knew then I had stepped into a new dimension of my walk with God.

As time went on I learned more and more about my “Spirit-filled life.” Typically, preachers and teachers would point to first Corinthians chapter twelve as the standard for the operation of the gifts of the Spirit.

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. (1 Cor. 12:7-11)

Based on this passage, here is how we understood the manner in which the gifts were supposed to operate in ours and other similar churches: we would come together for a service and hopefully the Holy Ghost would choose to use at least one person to cause one or more of His gifts to manifest. We had no idea as to why certain people were used and we had no idea as to what we could do to enhance our chances of being used in the gifts. All we knew was that the Holy Spirit would use people according to His will.

Since that is what we had been taught, that is what we believed. Scripture seemed so clear on the issue that we never considered anything else. The above passage and, in essence, the book of First Corinthians was the guide or reference book for Spirit-filled churches as to how spiritual gifts operated. Therefore, since this was what we believed, it was both the limit and the level of our expectations with regard to the gifts of the Spirit.

Then one day I began to again read First Corinthians from start to finish. The more I read, the more I began to sense that something wasn’t right. It was starting to seem as though this book was describing anything but the example or model for Spirit-filled churches. In fact, it was

starting to come across as a reference manual of what you *didn't* want for a church! I know that might sound way off base, but let me share some passages that will help you understand.

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:10-13)

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

Now some are puffed up, as though I would not come to you.
(1 Corinthians 4:18)

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? (1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 6)

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?
(1 Coribthians. 6:1-2, 5-7)

Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse. For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not.
(1 Corinthians. 11:17-19, 22)

Consider what you have just read; in the Corinthian church the following conditions existed: divisions, contentions, continued spiritual immaturity, strife, pride, open fornication, Christians

suings each other, heresies, and self-exaltation. Is this the pattern other churches should follow? Does God expect churches today to press toward the level of the Corinthian church? I hardly think so! Many churches would actually have to *regress* instead of *progress* to get to that level. Nevertheless, the church at Corinth is used as the model for both a Spirit-filled church and the operation of the gifts of the Spirit.

However, if the Corinthian church is *not* the model for churches, then what was Paul talking about in the twelfth chapter? After all, it really does seem like an instruction manual for the gifts of the Spirit. Yet if we take the time to use information from previous chapters to lay a foundation, we'll get a better understanding of what chapter twelve is revealing.

We've already read in chapter one that the church had contentions and was divided. Then in chapter two, verse six Paul says, "***Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect (spiritually mature): yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought.***" One way to paraphrase this verse is, "*We teach spiritual meat to those who are spiritually mature. This teaching does not have man or the things of this world as its origin.*"

In verses seven through fourteen Paul explains that the source of his teaching is God and that it is through fellowship with the Holy Spirit that he is able to receive this knowledge. In verse fifteen, Paul goes on to say, "***But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.***" In other words, "*He that is spiritually mature is able to discern whether or not a teaching is true meat that is of God.*"

But in the first two verses of chapter three Paul tells the Corinthians, "***And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.***" Based on what he said in chapter two we could put it like this, "*I've explained to you both how and what we teach to spiritually mature believers, but I can't teach you like this because you are not spiritually mature enough to discern it as truth. You are still thinking with a worldly, natural mindset. I have to teach you on the level of spiritual babies, almost as though you just got born again. I fed you before with spiritual milk because you couldn't handle meat and sadly, you cannot handle it now.*"

In all of this we can see that the entire book of First Corinthians is, in Paul's opinion, spiritual milk. Therefore, if we point to this book as the example that churches are to look towards and live by, we are literally saying that we as Christians should stay on milk!

By the time we get to chapter twelve, Paul has given an extensive list of problems in the Corinthian church, including the fact that they were too immature to handle spiritual meat. In chapter twelve, verse one Paul writes, "***Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant.***" In the context of everything Paul has said, we could read this as, "*I've already addressed numerous problems you people have, so let's continue on to another area. I don't want you to remain ignorant concerning the way the gifts of the Spirit have been manifesting in your services.*"

In verses seven through eleven, Paul provides an explanation (I'll paraphrase):

Verse seven: ***“But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.”*** (“The Holy Spirit produces the manifestation of His gifts through individuals for the benefit of the entire church.”)

Verses eight through ten: ***“For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues”*** (“The Holy Spirit uses one of you in the word of wisdom, then another person is used for the word of knowledge. He then moves through another person for supernatural faith, but moves to someone else to manifest the gifts of healing. Then, a different person is used for miracles, another for prophecy, someone else for discerning of spirits, and then other various individuals for tongues and interpretation.”)

Verse eleven: ***“But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.”*** (“But again, it is the Holy Spirit who is producing these gifts. He is the One who, by His will, chooses every one of the individuals through whom He will cause a gift to manifest.”)

Why would Paul have to remind them in verse eleven that it was the Holy Spirit who was causing the gifts to manifest? Shouldn't that have been common knowledge? Yes, it should have been and in reality it was. But he was trying to get across a very important message to the Corinthians.

Paul had already mentioned that they came behind in no gift (1 Cor. 1:7), so we know that the gifts of the Spirit were somewhat common in their services. But pride, arrogance, and gross spiritual immaturity had produced tremendous amounts of strife and division in their church. The manifestation of the gifts through people would have easily produced increased feelings of superiority and self-sufficiency. Allow me to give you a “Martin version” of what Paul was trying to get across to the Corinthians.

“You people have so many problems in your church! I don't want you to ignorantly believe that you are something grand just because the Holy Spirit uses you now and then in His gifts.

“Think about what happens in your services. One of you is used in the word of wisdom, while someone else is used in the word of knowledge. One person is used in a certain gift and a different person is used in another gift.

“Then, the next time you meet, different people altogether are used in gifts. It's never the same people used consistently in the same gifts and never the same person used each time for different manifestations.

“The reason for this is because you are too carnal and too spiritually immature to be used by God in a continual flow of His power so that any gift could manifest whenever necessary to meet the need of a person at any given time. If God were to release that kind of power through you at this point, it would only serve to produce more strife, more divisions, and more heresies.

“If you would grow up in the Lord, His power could rise to a new level in you. No longer would you be dependant on an occasional manifestation of a single gift. You would be able to operate and minister like Peter, John, myself, and even Jesus, for He said that we would be able to do the works that He did (John 14:12).”

If we as Christians build our hope on what we see in the Corinthian church, we will never go beyond the level of the people described in Paul’s letter. This has been a major problem in many churches. We look forward to and hope for the manifestation of *a gift*. We *hope* the Holy Spirit will choose to use us in at least one of the gifts sometime in our life. I could summarize it like this: we are looking for a power *gift* instead of a power *life*.

To our credit, we haven’t really been taught that it is possible to live daily with God’s power active in us to accomplish His works and His will. You see, the Corinthians didn’t have that kind of life; they had to wait for the Holy Spirit to move through them now and then, not on a consistent basis.

But if we do what is necessary to grow and mature spiritually, we will go beyond milk and start feasting on meat. We will have gone beyond petty jealousies and the strife that pride can produce. Self desire will be crucified and desire for Christ will be our only focus. Eventually, God’s power will begin to flow through us on a more consistent basis and the works of Jesus will be produced.

What is it we can do to spiritually mature? Prayer (primarily in tongues), fasting, worship (primarily private, getting alone with Jesus), and the Word (meditating, confessing, etc.). These are the things that will take us beyond the “Corinthian level” and into the place God desires us to live. I encourage you to give as much of your time as possible to doing these things. Your life will never be the same!

Yours in His love,

Jim

SPECIAL OFFER - The church at Corinth had teachers who were spreading confusion among Believers. This same condition exists in the Body of Christ today. This month I'm offering a CD of a sermon that will help you identify and avoid such teachers. Check the box below to receive a CD of the sermon "Beware of Grievous Wolves."

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